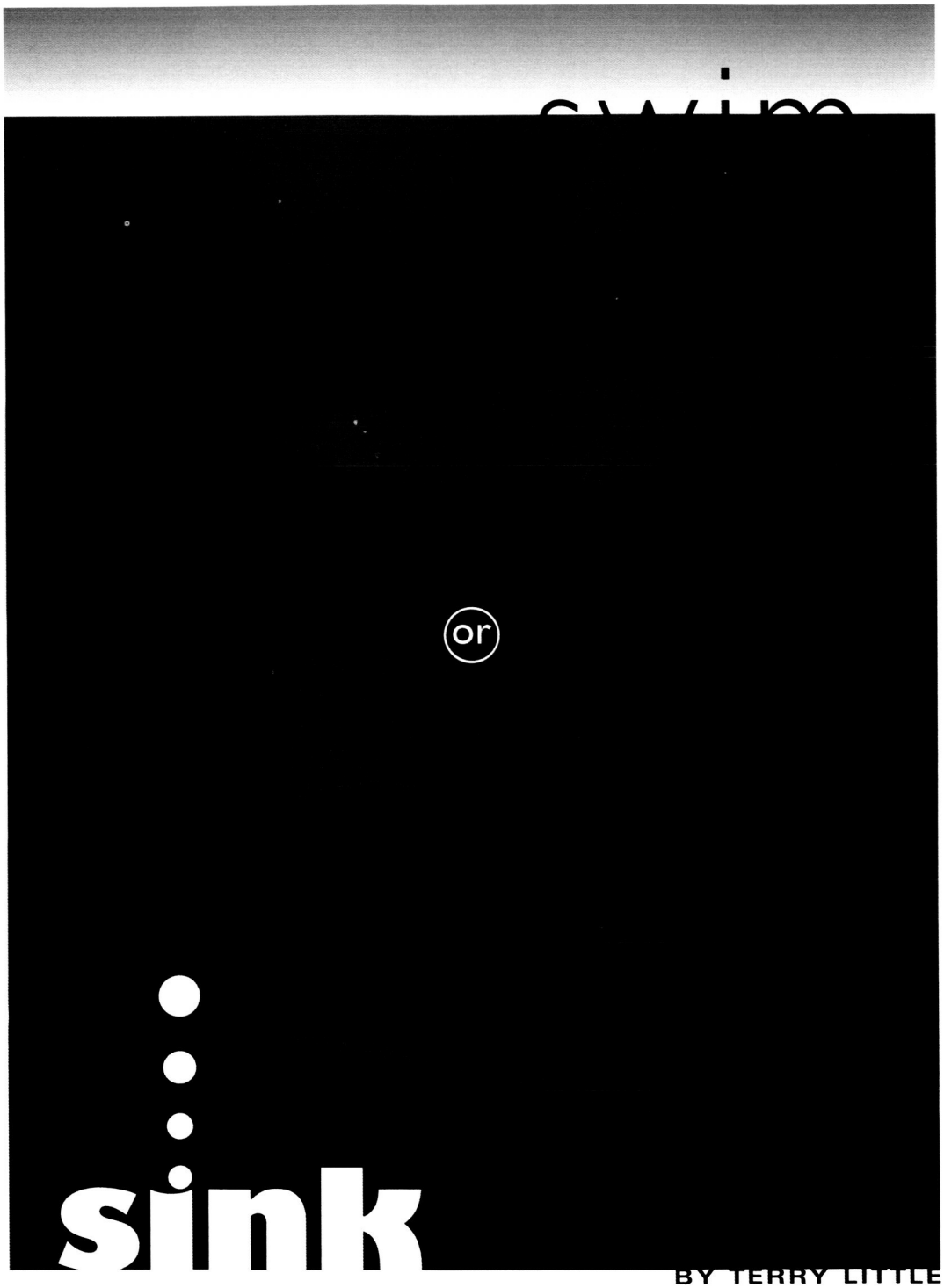

BY TERRY LITTLE

THE TRADITIONAL VIEW OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT IN THE government goes something like this: Start your career as a functional apprentice. Become a functional expert over time by exhibiting "technical leadership" (whatever that means). Over time, seek out positions of increasingly greater responsibility with corresponding job titles. Make a gradual transition from a specialty focus to a managerial focus.

Along the way submit to some vaccinations such as getting a Masters or PhD degree, attending some prestige courses, accepting a Headquarters assignment, and working at two or more field locations. Show some significant persistence and heaps of personal sacrifice. Avoid the big mistake. Burn no bridges.

We have the perfect model for career development, right? Senior Executive Service is virtually in the bag. Not quite. In fact, what we have is the perfect formula for a federal bureaucrat: great resume, no beef.

I propose an alternate approach that I call "sink or swim." Let me illustrate with a story. Lorene worked for me as a program manager. She was about 50 and had begun her career as a secretary, gradually working her way up to a GS-13; she had been a GS-13 about ten years even though she had filled all the squares for promotion. I liked her work. She was a better-than-average manager, but admitted to being intimidated by engineers because she didn't have "a technical degree."

Confronted with any technical issue she would invariably defer to the judgment of a government engineer, even when she understood the technical issue well enough to develop her own conviction. The unfortunate byproduct was that her program usually had cost and schedule difficulty because she was always pushing to reduce risk and develop the optimum solution.

One day she came to me and said that she was going to have to find another job. She told me that her husband had prostate cancer and that she wanted to spend more time with him. She said she couldn't continue to travel extensively. After thinking about the situation I suggested to her that she become my financial manager. I knew she was well-organized, disciplined, and caring—traits my financial manager at the time lacked. She would also not have to travel in that job. She demurred, declaring, "I don't have a financial background. I will get you into trouble."

I listened. When she finished, I told her that she was going into that job whether she liked it or not. Her getting me into trouble would be my problem, not hers. Making a long story short, she did an absolutely superb job turning the entire financial management operation around in less than six months. I was able to get her promoted to GS-14 and later supported her for a program manager position in another organization as a GS-15. She again excelled. I have since lost track of her, but have heard that she was recently promoted to the Senior Executive Service.

The normal career development path is one that never leads to getting into water over our heads.

How did all this happen? Basically she jumped (or more properly, allowed herself to be pushed) into water that was way over her head. She could have drowned, but she didn't. It was an enormous personal and career risk for her, but she came up a swimmer—a powerful, purposeful swimmer. The normal career development path is one that never leads to getting into water over our heads. But, wading comfortably around doesn't produce swimmers. •

TERRY LITTLE is the Director of the Kinetic Energy Boost Office at the Missile Defense Agency. One of the most seasoned program managers in DoD, he is also a regular contributor to *ASK Magazine*.

In July, the **Academy of Program and Project Leadership (APPL)** conducted a two-week class in **Advanced Project Management** at Ames Research Center. In the heart of Silicon Valley, Ames is known as one of NASA's strongest Centers in software development and information technology. To take advantage of these local resources, course manager John Newcomb structured the class with a specific focus on managing complex software projects.

Included in each Advanced Project Management class is a practicum, otherwise known as the Enterprise project assignment. The students are asked to solve an ongoing problem faced by one of NASA's project teams. In this case, Newcomb invited the Mars Science Laboratory (MSL) mission, managed by Mike Sander of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, to use the Enterprise project as an opportunity to address a problem facing MSL. "We're rapidly coming up on our concept review," Sander stated. "Getting a firm handle on the technology development plan for MSL is very much of an issue."

Sander, and his deputy Rich Doyle, came up with the following problem for the class: *To create a workflow process, description, and test case that identifies, selects, matures, and integrates new software with existing software to create flight code for MSL.* Integral to the assignment, class members, who represented seven of the ten NASA Centers as well as Headquarters, had to make certain to address costs, schedule, and risk constraints.